

Opening Comments by Tracy Beck
Oregon House of Representatives, Agriculture and Natural Resources
Committee
January 11, 2018

Good morning Chairman Clem, Vice-Chairs McLain & Sprenger, and members of the Committee. My name is Tracy Beck and I am Forest Supervisor for the Willamette National Forest based in Springfield, Oregon. I am joined here today by Craig Glazier, Assistant Director for Fire & Aviation Management in the USDA Forest Service's Pacific Northwest Region. We are here today on behalf of Regional Forester Jim Peña, who sends his regrets that he was unable to be here personally. I will aim to keep my opening remarks brief in order to reserve more time for your questions.

I want to begin by thanking the Legislature, Governor's Office, and State agencies for your active participation and partnership in the management of our National Forests. We appreciate this opportunity to testify alongside our Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF) partners. The mutual cooperation and assistance we enjoy with ODF, the State Fire Marshal, municipal fire protection districts, and local government leaders is absolutely essential to the work we do, particularly around wildfire management. We are grateful for the strong and effective relationships we enjoy with our partners here in Oregon and are committed to building on that foundation.

The Pacific Northwest Region experienced a long and arduous fire season in 2017. This was partly due to the particularly wet winter we had in 2016-2017 which, in combination with an early spring, contributed to significant new vegetative growth. An extended stretch of hot and dry summer weather followed and caused much of that new growth to dry out quickly and become prone to ignition. These conditions led to atypical fire patterns including an unusual number of high-elevation starts on National Forest System lands early in the season that escaped initial attack and spread on to state and private lands. Despite challenging conditions, our initial attack success rate remains consistent with past years at 96-98%, meaning we catch all but 2-4 % of our fires when they are small.

Here in Oregon 2,042 fires, including 76 that met the criteria for Large Fire designation, affected 725,615 acres across all types of landownership. This included 1,133 fires on 492,370 acres of National Forest System lands. Many of

these fires occurred west of the Cascades. Thousands of Oregonians were impacted by smoke and evacuation orders. Sixteen homes and 45 other structures burned. Fortunately, we did not experience any direct loss of life or serious bodily injuries.

After conducting Burned Area Emergency Assessments on over 700,000 acres across the Region we found that 9.5% of the impacted acres had a high soil burn severity, 26.2% burned at moderate severity, and 64.3% saw low or very low severity burns. We are working diligently to capture timber value from these lands and have identified 27.5 million board feet of salvage harvest potential so far with additional assessment work remaining. We anticipate completing National Environmental Policy Act reviews of all of these salvage projects by the end of June 2018.

For the Fiscal Year (FY) 2017 fire season, the cumulative costs of the Forest Service's wildland fire suppression activities once again exceeded the funding available. With over 28,000 people supporting firefighting activities during peak fire season, total Forest Service costs exceeded \$2.4 billion nationwide. This, once again, makes the past year the most expensive to-date for fire suppression. The USDA Forest Service spent more than \$334 million on fire suppression in Oregon alone during our 2017 Fiscal Year.

One way we intend to change this trend is by continuing to partner with states, counties, tribes, and other stakeholders to implement the national Cohesive Wildfire Strategy. The Cohesive Strategy was developed jointly by federal and state land managers, Tribes, NGOs and other stakeholders. The Strategy's stated purpose is "To safely and effectively extinguish fire when needed; use fire where allowable; manage our natural resources; and as a Nation, live with wildland fire." The Cohesive Strategy provides a framework for all of us to work together toward three goals: 1) Restoring and maintaining landscapes, 2) Creating fire-adapted communities, and 3) Improving fire response. This means working together to expedite fuel reduction and other vegetation management projects, to find efficiencies and improve risk assessment and risk management techniques for wildfire response, and to ensure there is defensible space around communities and structures. Oregon has been a national leader in piloting and implementing the

Cohesive Wildfire Strategy, receiving over \$1.1 million in USFS grant money since 2012 for projects in the Blue Mountains, Deschutes County, and Southwest Oregon.

State and local officials here in Oregon have been invaluable partners in each of these endeavors. A few examples of our key cooperative efforts include implementing fuel reduction and forest restoration projects across state/federal boundaries under the Good Neighbor Authority, convening managers for pre-season interagency fire simulation and post-fire after action review exercises, and encouraging consideration of wildfire risks in local planning and zoning through the FireWise Communities program. Consistent investment in these programs helps to foster strong, effective intergovernmental relationships which helps us accomplish more work on the ground to enhance the ecological and economic resilience of Oregon communities. We appreciate this committee's support of the USDA Forest Service's partnership with your state and welcome your questions.